

8 December 2004

KAZAKHSTAN: Who ordered imam attestations?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Following earlier state pressure to force mosques to join the central Spiritual Administration of Muslims, a government official has denied to Forum 18 News Service that there is any state involvement in the Spiritual Administration's campaign of compulsory re-attestation of imams in South Kazakhstan region. But it has been claimed to Forum 18 that the re-attestation is taking place at the prompting of the state, following the discovery of terrorist training camps in the southern region, which borders Uzbekistan. It is not clear by what authority the re-attestation campaign is taking place, especially as the Spiritual Administration is reportedly using the campaign to try to control whether imams from mosques not in its organisation stay in their posts.

A government official has denied to Forum 18 News Service that there is any state involvement in the compulsory re-attestation of imams in South Kazakhstan region. The Kazakh newspaper Express-K reported on 3 December that over 100 of the 500 or more mosques in the region, which borders Uzbekistan, are not part of the central Spiritual Administration of Muslims – which is conducting the attestation - and special attention will be paid to these mosques. Abdulla Bakhadyr, the regional imam's press officer, told the paper that imams who pass the attestation will be allowed to keep their posts, but those who fail will lose their posts.

"The attestation of imams is a matter for the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan, and there is no state involvement in it," Vladimir Zharinov, chief specialist on religious affairs of the administration for South Kazakhstan region, insisted to Forum 18 from the regional centre Shymkent on 5 December. Earlier in 2004, state pressure was applied to try to force mosques to join the Spiritual Administration (see F18News 11 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=250). Zharinov did not state by what authority the Spiritual Administration could assess mosques not under its control, or decide whether the imams of those mosques could keep or lose their posts.

But Serik Aidarov, director of the Shymkent sociological resources centre, believes that the attestation is indeed prompted by the authorities. "Ever since the Kazakh authorities found that there were terrorist training camps in our region, and it turned out that the suicide bombers who carried out the terrorist attacks in the Uzbek capital Tashkent on 30 July were Uzbek-born citizens of Kazakhstan, the authorities have been trying to reinforce their control over believers in our region," he told Forum 18 on 5 December. "The authorities are concentrating primarily on the Uzbek enclave, where most of the unregistered mosques are situated." He said the Spiritual Administration of Muslims, which he maintains traditionally supports the government, is helping them do this.

The Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan's press officer, Ongar Vorimbek, stressed that the organisation intends to subject all the mosques to a single central body, and to ensure that all of them are registered with the state justice agencies. "Under Kazakh law, all mosques have to be registered with the justice agencies and subject to a single central body, that being the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan," he told Forum 18 on 4 December.

However, the religion law says nothing about a requirement for religious associations to be subject to a single central agency, or about a requirement to register. But in contradiction to this, Kazakhstan's administrative code does seem to require registration. However the legal position is unclear and Roman Podoprigena, a lawyer who specialises in religion, told Forum 18 that "it is virtually impossible to show that believers really do refuse to register". Kazakh officials themselves hold contradictory views as to whether registration is compulsory (see F18News 10 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=249).

Zharinov from the state regional administration admitted that an issue about unregistered mosques in the Uzbek-populated districts of South Kazakhstan region "certainly exists", but also stressed that as "registration was not compulsory under Kazakh law", and that the authorities did not put pressure on the unregistered mosques. At the same time, he said, "the Spiritual Administration is carrying out extensive work with the mosques that are not associated with it, and is persuading them to register with the justice agencies". The number of unregistered mosques is therefore going down, maintains Zharinov.

South Kazakhstan region, bordering Uzbekistan, is quite distinct from the rest of Kazakhstan and approximately 18 per cent of its population are ethnic Uzbeks. In contrast to most ethnic Kazakh Muslims, ethnic Uzbek Muslims are generally very devout and an ongoing mosque "Kazakhification" campaign has led to many imams of ethnic Uzbek mosques to refuse to be subject to the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan. This is virtually the only example of resistance by ethnic Uzbek Muslims to the Kazakh government (see F18News 11 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=250). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Kazakhstan religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=249

A printer-friendly map of Kazakhstan is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=kazakh>

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